

### In Passing

impressions  
of our moments  
linger  
for many days and nights  
a nomad bears his load

I stare out over the bay and watch as ripples of  
violet and orange mingle on the horizon.  
Cumulus clouds etch the evening sky. Waves of  
wind blow tall marsh grass against my knees.  
The familiar scent of the sea wafts into my  
imagination and settles there with thoughts of  
you. A lone heron wades along the shoreline  
and then vanishes with the sun.

### fly on a wall



Richard Milton Grahm

# Fly on a Wall

# **A Chapbook of Haibun and Tanka Prose**

Richard Milton Grahm

2018 – 2019



## **Dedication**

In loving memory of Helen Grahn: role model, mentor, guiding light, companion, friend, and grandmother. Thank you for fostering my aspirations and for filling me with meaning and purpose. The persistence you taught me has made this dream a reality.

## **The Softest Sigh**

I treasure each moment we spent together,  
every flower that made you smile.

memories of you . . .  
water dripping  
through my fingers

## Rainy Monday

*A closed book tells no stories. An unlit candle sheds no light.*

Here before you stands a recluse, flesh laid bare to the teeth of a perilous world, waiting here to share with you the quiet fruits of solitude. The years are flying by and it's time to light some candles.

rainy Monday . . .  
another stolen glimpse  
from the window

Being a hermit can be comfortable, even easy. Well, it's easy if you can live without the intrigue of human intercourse on a daily basis. Otherwise, you'll find it quite unsuitable.

To combat my reclusive nature and expand my social horizons, I've taken to making new friends and engaging in various community activities. I'm going to a poetry workshop tomorrow, for example. Later today, I'll go on a road trip with my friend John. In the meantime, I'm writing this missive for you.

Solitude can be a magical thing. It really boils down to what you do with the magic. I use it to create. Creativity is a wonderful remedy for depression and anxiety. It's uplifting and leaves me with a sense of accomplishment. It's difficult to balance exposure to the world with the need to sit quietly in my own skin. Still, it's doable, so I

just keep trying to get better at doing it.

fresh from its cocoon  
a moth romances porchlight . . .  
old men ponder runes

## **Moving On**

*Haibun Today*: 12.4

Moving is no fun, but after living in a nursing home for over two years I find it to be an adventure. My stuff, those things that have been languishing in storage all this time, is finally in my possession again. I am rediscovering myself one box at a time. Each box is filled with memories that make looking back both painful and liberating. This vial of Herkimer diamonds, for example, a gift from my favorite rock hound, Grandpa . . . old birthday cards from people who no longer remember my birthday . . . pictures of my last girlfriend . . . aha, my favorite slippers!

Freedom is exhilarating. Not that being cooped-up kept me from expressing myself or expanding my horizons. Heck, during my stay at the nursing home I wrote over 500 poems, made friends outside the home and explored the microcosm of a world around me with staunch enthusiasm. Still, I thank God I'm on my own again.

summer symphony . . .  
oh how the meadow  
explodes with song

Reborn, my world is full of new and second chances.  
Now, each memory, each opportunity, each dream is a  
reason to grow. Every time I look in the mirror, I see a  
new man, a new creation.

lightning strikes  
as the earth keeps spinning  
he climbs the mountain

## **Before Now**

What is a memory? Is it a map or the terrain, an illusion  
or reality, a blessing or a curse? Whatever it is, this one is  
mine and it must be tangible because I'm about to share it  
with you . . .

*Leaves have transformed into washes of amber and  
scarlet. Wind rushes through them in great whooshes. I  
watch as the laden branches bend and sway, waves of  
color sweeping a cloudy sky. It's just a little bit brisk  
today but I don't really notice because I'm all immersed  
in the essence of autumn.*

From out of the corner of my ear, I sense my mother  
calling, calling me for whatever. It's easy to pretend not  
to hear. I'm only ten (with the attention span of a two-  
year-old) and I'm busily watching the wind, not strictly  
abiding by the usual mother/child code of conduct. This  
time I'm late for lunch. Now I hear her screaming. The  
wind is no match for her fury.



I remember sitting in the highchair for a full hour after lunch as punishment for my noncompliance. Looking back at it, it was a small price to pay for my moments of reverie. Mom and I were eventually able to laugh about it all right before she died. Her screams still persist but I'd rather spend my recollections absorbed in the sound of her laughter and the many shades of the wind.

damn distracting tune  
stuck in my head . . .  
bubblegum on a shoe

## **Aviary**

*Haibun Today*: 12.2

The eight-year-old boy can't reach the first branch of the largest of a pair of Maples in the front yard so he settles for the lowest branch of the smaller tree. He easily pulls himself up into the first crotch and pauses there, planning his route to the top of his favorite aviary. He knows each branch like the back of his hand, every step, every handhold. He starts to climb, one limb at a time.

As the boy ascends, the branches get smaller and more flexible. He can feel himself now swaying gently in the wind. He can almost (but not quite) poke his head out of the leaves at the top of the tree before he's forced to stop climbing. Here he tucks a leg into the fork between two branches and settles in.

First, he senses the breeze gently evaporating the sweat

from his climb. Then he feels the sun poking through the few leaves hovering above his wandering eyes. Eventually, the sound of those rustling leaves bleeds into his awareness. All would be silent if it weren't for the rhythm of the leaves and the chirping of an unseen bird. The boy is where he needs to be. A robin lights on the branch beside him. He wishes he could fly.

dancing  
with a cricket . . .  
moonrise

## **Clemency**

*Poetry Corner*: Problem Solving Peacefully

Grandma used to have a saying, “this looks like where the bear went through the berries” that she would often recite when she found our room a mess. When we cleaned it up, she would make donuts for us from scratch. The night us kids got into the beer at a family wedding reception, that night on the way home, she blurted out “this car smells like a brewery!” preceded by a swear word she could only bring herself to tersely spell out. The next day, she made us root beer floats. And, that was grandma. Not a castigatory bone in her body.

my heart  
in your forgiving hands . . .  
after the storm a rainbow

## **South of Tomorrow**

*Contemporary Haibun Online*: 14.1

A peaceful country road winds its way through the quiet fields and pastures just south of the Mason-Dixon Line here in Maryland. This lazy pathway is not encumbered with bumper-to-bumper traffic, the honking of horns or the sounds of marching armies. In fact, the only real commotion here is caused by a few red-winged blackbirds flitting about; squabbling over whatever piece of real estate it is that they're hell-bent on plundering next. The occasional tractor chugs by and, every so often, a car. The Doppler Effect seems very noticeable here or so I've noticed. I was aimlessly driving my own car down this road when I just had to stop, get out, and listen to the view.

dragonflies stirring...  
imprints of wind  
on a cloud

The scent of hay, corn, fresh-tilled earth and cow manure mingle together and saturate the warm summer air. It's a country thing. As you might guess, there's a lot that goes into concocting the average bucolic day but I'm just a tourist passing by. What do I know?

A grasshopper jumps out of the tall grass beside the road and lands at my feet. I'm careful not to step on it as I get back into the car and start the engine. The noise shocks the air and the grasshopper wings away. I pull back onto the road, lost in the sound of the waves I'm making, semi-oblivious to my own existence and overcome with a

sudden urge to turn on the radio and listen to some country music.

**Dear You,**

*Prune Juice: 27*

It's been quite a while since we last spoke. I really have been busy. This spring found me, as usual, cleaning cobwebs off my honey-to-do list and stashing winter clothes in the attic. The front door still squeaks and I know how much that always bothered you. I think I'll actually do something about it this year.

How have you been? I can't remember it ever being so quiet around here. The pots and pans don't clang around in the kitchen as much as they used to and the washing machine is off on a fritz. I do miss our repartee. Oh, what I would pay to hear you stab at me just one more time. A good parry is what I need right now. Nothing too heavy though. You know how we used to argue.

Anyway, here's a little poem I wrote a rainy day or two ago. I hope you like it.

memories of us...  
wind chimes  
in a storm

Do stay in touch. I've never been too good with words and I know you must be busy so I'll just say goodbye for now. Hope you're doing well.

Sincerely,

Me

P.S. just a reminder...you left your footprints in the garden.

## **We Met**

high up  
above the pale mountain  
an owl circles...  
my love lets her hair fall  
into moonlight

I often remember the way we met, two strangers loitering with seagulls on the otherwise-empty boardwalk just minutes before sunrise. I remember the way my vision of you blended into the briny aroma wafting up from the gently rolling sea, the smell of salt and seaweed embedded in your silhouette outlined against the horizon.

The hypnotic sound of the waves punctuated with a simple “Good morning” was all it took to create a short, uneasy pause before our smiles slowly emerged from the shadows. I tossed a piece of bread to the birds which immediately started squabbling over it. As we watched, it slowly dawned on me that I had you there all to myself.

a knock on the door  
emerges from the realm  
of evening silence...  
one heartstring plucked  
from a bed of roses

## **Softly in the Rain**

Johanna had this cute pigeon-toed walk that made her butt sway like a sailor who's been a little too long in port or in the port (depending on how you want to look at it). She had long-flowing, wavy, black hair that tantalized my fingers and tickled my nose. She was a lover of music, particularly rock and roll. Her dancing was exotic, hypnotic even. She loved to laugh and smile and that adorable southwestern accent made her easy to listen to and converse with. I was never shy about telling her how much she enthralled me and that seemed to make her happy but she always acted like she didn't really know how beautiful she was. I would just have to keep reminding her of that fact, more often than not, with a kiss.

gentle mist  
I walked with you  
as hand-in-hand we traveled  
beyond the night  
to sunrise

It's been said that perpetual motion is not perpetual. It's been said that memories fade but for now my memories

of you are perpetual. That night in Santa Fe, as we watched Old Man Gloom burn to the ground, that night the sight of your gentle face in the flickering light was emblazoned onto my soul. We never spoke unkindly to one another and now we never will. It was an amicable parting of the ways and I will always thank you for that. You left me with something good to remember and I'm happy you're here to stay.

you touched my sleeve  
as we passed by  
the ground  
beneath us  
shook

## **Disillusion**

@winter . . . you've lost my attention! Let the sun turn the world green and children play in the park.

fortune cookie  
I count spare change  
anticipating a bargain

## Center of the Universe

*Atlas Poetica: 34*

in the fields  
where I used to play  
the world has changed . . .  
everything seems smaller  
even blades of grass

What you saw on that empty hillside many decades ago, I'll never really know because you took that vision with you to your grave. What you made of it though, remains a pleasant memory even if time has not wasted any time in etching it slowly away. The shelves in the spare room have other people's stuff on them now. The cobwebs in the attic are new. The rock garden has been ripped out but ants in the yard are still building castles in the sand.

I can remember the creaky sequence of five doors opening and closing through the garage and into the kitchen. A wooden thunk, a spring, a click, a gentle yawn, a clunk. Did you purposely build that into my memories of you? I mean, there you were on the foundation of your dreams raising a home where I could come alive. What I took away from that is nothing less than the stuff of a mythical adventure.

Still, it wasn't a structure that stood at the center of my universe. It was you. Wood and stone and plaster were no match for your wit, patience, and capacity to love and forgive. What you built beside that little hill can't be measured with watch or stick. Every year the leaves



come falling down. I'm sorry I can't rake them all but  
that never really mattered to you, now did it?

dreams conceived beneath the stars  
have returned to the meadow  
where life remains  
a poem on the lips  
of a child

## **The Last Exit**

*Haibun Today*: 12.4

It begins somewhere in the nebulous inklings of REM sleep, at just about midnight, as we're speeding down a quiet wooded road. Sara has the wheel in a stranglehold. We're in the midst of a major tiff.

From out of the darkness, a pair of glowering-white eyes suddenly appears in the headlights. Instead of hitting the brakes, Sara flips the overdrive switch. The car leaves the ground with a whoosh and is quickly transformed into a flying carpet in the shape of a raven. Gravity pulls at the pit of my stomach. Sara is nowhere to be seen.

My temper slowly settles to a simmer as the raven-carpet soars higher and higher into the moonless, starlit night. Soon the earth vanishes, and the rug pulls over next to a narrow set of stairs stretching upward in the direction of the constellation Orion. Three hula dancers step forward to greet me with leis in their outstretched hands. They lead the way, swaying hypnotically in the starlight,

strewn petals along the steps. Together we climb into an endless realm of sky as my thoughts reach out for Sara.

oh, that I had never left  
such echoes in your ears . . .  
butterflies  
morph into wolves  
feasting on my words

Saint Peter stands at the top of the stairs next to Sara and an archangel wielding a trumpet. Suddenly, the horn sounds and the stairs fall away.

Falling is far from flying. There's no bottom to space. Stars whiz by as a cold sweat pours out onto the sheets. The dream ends with a lurch, and I wake up feeling unworthy.

## **The Back Forty**

Snowball had a mind of his own. The stubborn pony with a predilection for hanging out in the barn wasn't fond of being ridden. Still, kids will be kids and we would try to ride him.

The process involved taking him by the halter and leading him out into the pasture. Then we climbed on bareback and held on for dear life as he bolted for the barn. The last time I rode him, I wound up hanging upside-down from his neck, my fist wrapped tightly in

his mane as he galloped across the field. I remember stepping down into a pile of manure as he trotted back into the corral. Everyone got a good laugh out of it, even me.

just another cowboy  
on the prairie in his mind . . .  
shoeshine

## **Beneath the Sky, Reflections**

It's quiet here. The sky is cloudless. A moth flutters on the most subtle of breezes. There's barely a ripple on the water. If reflections could speak, they would speak of silence, of harmony and of deep introspection. Locked in the aquatic mirror, a world of wonder stands fully exposed to this image of itself. There is no judgment, no criticism no need for redemption, just a picture of what is here and now, a picture sprinkled with lily pads and geese, a peaceful scene at perfect ease...

Bathed in echoes from the surface of the pond, each tree, each reed, each leaf lives a fleeting second life entranced in the liquid glass. The moth settles on a blade of marsh-grass. A frog leaps into the air capturing the winged delicacy in her open mouth, swallowing it whole. Ripples of this death dance roll across the pond as the frog splashes back into the water. Silence and the surface of the mirror are shattered but the quiet sky remains. Stillness pauses then begins to heal. Another moth appears.

an old leaf falls  
into its own reflection...  
teacups fill with rain

## **Pleasant Street**

come hither child  
please take my hand  
and we can play together  
in the sunny fields  
that we were born to roam

Richie, an impressionable seven-year-old boy, sits in the front seat of the bus, right behind the door across the aisle from the driver. The bus is making its daily 10-mile trek from the school in Freeport, Maine back to Brunswick where this load of children lives. It's a day like so many other school days. The sun is out and the temperature is almost perfect. It's a great afternoon for playing ball. Richie is lost in a daydream, surrounded by the banter of the other children on the bus.

Earlier, at recess, Richie played tetherball with his best friend Ronny. As usual, the matches were hotly contested. It's a game they play every day when the weather allows. Now, Ronny is sitting behind him, cracking jokes. Ronny is a jokester but also a good student, a very obedient and God-fearing boy, always willing to help others and share what little of his he has. As the bus approaches Ronny's stop on Pleasant Street,

he warmly says his goodbyes with a joker's grin still firmly affixed to his face. "I'll see you tomorrow," Richie enthusiastically replies. The bus stops. The driver turns on the flashers and opens the door. Ronny gets up; heads down the steps and out into the street just as the world comes crashing to a halt—

Richie hears the thump and stares in horrified disbelief as the scene unfolds in front of him. As if in slow motion, he sees the tossed ragdoll shape of Ronny flying across the intersection. He sees a small sports car squeal to a stop just inches from the now motionless boy. He sees a drunk driver stagger out of the car and across the street. He sees a woman pull a shawl over Ronny's now twisted face. He sees the police arrest the driver as the ambulance takes Ronny away. A couple of days later, he sees Ronny's mother pulling clumps of hair out of her head at the funeral. Eventually, he sees his classmates at school again but it's not just any other day. The tetherball rope hangs limp and no one can answer the questions he doesn't even know how to ask.

I hear the roar of embers  
bursting into flames  
drowning out the echoes  
of me crying out  
your name

## So Many Shades of Water

Above, up there somewhere in the sky, this cold mountain river pours over a precipice and into the gorge where I now stand. I hiked down into the valley from the ridge this morning and then upstream through the field of massive boulders littering the banks on either side of the raging water. Moss on the rocks, slick with spray, made my progress more treacherous with each step taken towards the falls but, now that I am here, all that fades away.

The sun is hot already and its warmth provides an interesting contrast to the cool mist emanating from the feathery downward rush. Everywhere I look, I see rainbows in the mist. This gift of mountain rain casts its echoes on the canyon walls to the rhythm of the pulsing in my veins. Here, born again on the slippery rocks, bathed in a surreal sea of rainbows, locked in a moment inside my mind, I throw off all my clothes and wade into the river.

for this sunrise a song...  
from this leaf a dewdrop  
falling

## **The Next Moment –**

*Under the Basho: 2018*

He watched the leaf drop beneath the horizon and gently  
light on the ground. He watched as it became a memory,  
lingering there in the blooming sunrise.

one step closer  
to revelation . . .  
a cherry tree blossoms

## **Enchanted**

*Haibun Today: 13.1*

The poet eases into his favorite chair, fingers waiting  
eagerly for a puff of imagination to settle onto the keys.  
One-by-one, each digit moves and slowly a dance ensues.

He searches for his partner. The muse alights in his mind.  
They step out onto the page and begin to twirl.

**one**  
the storybook begins  
with “once upon a time”  
from there we’re left to find a way  
to weave our dreams  
between the lines

**two**

many yesterdays ago  
there lived a pair on a hill  
he walked each day to the spring  
to fetch her a cup  
of water

**three**

milady, your hands  
fit into mine  
as stars fit into the sky . . .  
if this is all a dream  
then please try not to wake me

**one . . .**

## **The Other Side of Midnight**

*A Medication Journal Entry*

*Scryptic: 1.4*

March 13, 2018 – *My energy normally fluctuates. This piece was written over a period encompassing numerous cycles of said fluctuation.*

I'm sitting here typing—trying to write a haibun. The problem is that the medication is getting in the way of my brainwaves. When I'm in my manic state, thoughts flow over the dam in a steady stream. In my supposedly-appropriately-medicated state, the proverbial spillway seems to run a bit dry.



blackened fog  
hides the moonlit sky . . .  
moths gather in the shadows

Bi-polar disorder is fun, well, that's until I start thinking I can run the world. Then things start to get a bit complicated. It's hard to describe when these fingers don't even have the energy to manipulate the keys. The clock on the wall is ticking. Dust is gathering on the bookshelves and the rays of sunlight have vanished into the solemn hour of midnight.

awake in a dream—  
reality bites  
my dog

What I know about mental illness is that stability comes with a price tag. To have lived a life benefiting from the adrenaline rush of mania seems at first to be a blessing. But then there's the curse of grandiose thinking and risky behavior not to mention depression looming on the other end of the bridge.

Here, in the middle of that lonely bridge, there stands a fairy with a medicine box clutched in her outstretched hand. Here, there is no turning back. Here, there is no empathy, no emotion played away on the black and white keys of a grand piano. Here I'm just another cardboard silhouette casually propped up in a department store window. Here, there is no shore. Time traces fingerprints on the window. The window opens and I step out onto the crowded street.

got a problem?  
take a pill . . .  
follow the winding stream

I take a careful step or two, stagger and then stand still. I pause for another breath and then lean into the wind. I'm not sure where I'm headed but I think I see a light ahead. This dream may really be for nothing but nothing's ever felt so real.

somewhere buried  
deep inside—  
a clock-spring marking time

## **Driftwood**

*Atlas Poetica: 37*

The wandering woman curls her toes into the sand as a wave cascades over her feet. The cool, frothy wash provides an interesting contrast to the heat of the merciless sun above. As the wave recedes, it leaves a small patch of seaweed on the beach. The next wave rolls in and washes it back into the sea.

As she continues down the beach, each new wave caresses her ears with a methodical roar and swish as it crashes and then rushes back into the path of the next oncoming wave. Sometimes a wave just covers her toes, while other times, the water goes up to her knees. The sand is ever shifting with her thoughts.

we were born into this life  
to be what we can be . . .  
to believe  
our dreams are real  
and all that we've imagined

“What shall become of me?” she wonders.

## **Winter's Bitter Edge**

*Atlas Poetica: 37*

The walking man studies the footprints he's made in the freshly-fallen snow, footprints meandering back through time, back through time with his thoughts. There he finds a boy playing by a stream, happy as a boy can be. He walks over and says, “Hello.” The boy doesn't hear. He wants to say “remember this” but all he can do is watch for a while as the child works his way along the bank and finally out of sight.

His thoughts lead back to a grassy field where a young man tosses hay bales onto a wagon. The man in the snow wants to shout “be careful” but again can only watch as the farm cart passes by. He knows the young man has no reason to listen to the wind. Turning up his collar, he shrugs away the cold.

Blowing snow is covering his tracks. He's watching them fade away. He searches for what is left of her, her footprints in the snow. He wants to tell her “I'm sorry” but the footprints just aren't there. The trail's gone cold

and he's walking alone on his way back home in a blizzard.

recollections . . .  
layers of settling dust  
on the bookshelves  
begin to obscure  
the stories

## **Dreamories**

*Atlas Poetica*: Stacking Stones

In the early hours of a brand new day, I back my car out of the garage and park it temporarily on the street. The ominous sky above tangles in my mind with the distant memories of a long-lost wife. Slowly my thoughts turn and wander around the corner where I find myself wondering if animals have dreams...

Thunder brings the rain—  
my cat curls up  
to take a nap  
on the dry side  
of the window.

What I've discovered is that dreams are bittersweet and memories are just along for the ride. Driving down the back alleys of my mind I see a sign that reads "NO U-TURN." Breaking that law is just not possible. We're not programmed that way...

Rays bleeding  
through wounded skies...  
across the lake  
a skipping stone eventually  
complies with gravity.

A car door opens somewhere inside my thoughts. I step out and begin to wonder where I'll be tomorrow. I wonder if the squirrels in the almond trees believe in God. I wonder if God believes in me. I'm wandering through a forest of moments, dancing with my waking memories but the waking's really all I need to begin another dream...

In the taste of morning  
a fleeting dance  
unfurls  
as sunlight  
greet the leaves.

## **Sebastian**

*Atlas Poetica: Stacking Stones*

The hungry man can't read his timepiece on the nightstand because there's a glare on its crystal face. His reflection in the window doesn't help but it feels like way past dinnertime for sure. The split-pea soup in the freezer sounds good but it took a long time to grow those peas and make the soup. Instead, he decides the time is right to write another letter or perhaps a simple poem...

Sun fades  
into a maroon splash  
on the western horizon...  
you slowly curl up  
into the song of night.

There's no forgetting you, my fingers running through  
your hair, your nose against my cheek. We've howled  
together at the moon and taken in the starlight. We've  
watched the waves roll on the shore. We've walked  
across the field. We've wallowed in the mudflats and  
we've crossed the street together...

If I gave you a bone  
to chew  
you'd chew it...  
thanks for keeping  
our secrets.

## **Make that a Double**

*Contemporary Haibun Online: 14.2*

Mom had a poodle named Martini. She did love that dog  
but may have loved the liquid indulgence even more. I  
mean, she always pampered that mutt but she could also  
outdrink a fish. The haircuts, ribbons, bows, and extra  
olives certainly made for a colorful childhood no matter  
how you choose to look at it. Anyway, I'm just sitting  
here right now, idly sipping a memory of the two of  
them, enjoying a little hair of the dog, and ambivalently

wondering if pets are allowed on the furniture in heaven.

moonrise at sunset...  
shadows of wildflowers  
in his hand

## **Memorial Day 2018**

*Contemporary Haibun Online*: 14.3

Dad died two years ago today. How's that for a Memorial Day memory? The park is filled with families and friends gathered together around barbeque grills, coolers, bouquets of large colorful beach umbrellas and a wide variety of pop-up tents and awnings. Like a field of tombstones, the lawn is littered with monuments raised to the fleeting ambitions of the living. I'm walking through a graveyard of the living.

The aroma of charred meat and the laughter of children permeate the muggy air. Adults are doing adult things. We used to do that...gather around the coals, drink beer, tell stupid stories, and...oh...and eat too much. It seems that's all that's left—memories of picnics punctuated with the reality only a grave marker can truly provide. As I walk past the graves of the living, I stop to ask myself: where have all the stories gone and where are all these children headed? Perhaps the best option, at this point, is to just reach down inside and try really hard to summon the courage to cry.

harvest moon...  
the old ways keep  
getting older

## **Bases Loaded**

*Contemporary Haibun Online: 14.4*

Grass-stains on knees are the least of their worries. The ball is lost in the hay again. Earlier this spring, they mowed a large section of this hayfield into a baseball diamond and then adorned it with torn up bits of T-shirt carefully arranged to mark out the bases. The infield is cropped short but the outfield is truly out in the field. The “hay” is really just a tangle of clover, some sort of domestic grass and wild strawberries. The game itself is doomed from the beginning. All attempts to keep the ball in the infield wind up with the ball in the tall grass. It's just a matter of time before this comes down to picking berries rather than looking for the ball.

childhood...  
nothing ever measures up  
but something always fits

## **The Price of a Life**

*Contemporary Haibun Online: 15.1*

We met one sweltering summer evening at the bar in Rosa's Cantina in the little village of Toko-ri, South



Korea, in 1978.

“Yoboseyo GI,” she whispered with a welcoming smile.  
“You want short-time or long-time?” she asked playfully.

I may have been only 18 but I knew what she was asking. The going rates were five and ten dollars respectively. I brushed her question aside and asked if I could buy her a drink. She gladly accepted. We began to talk. After a while, an older lady came over and spoke to her rather tersely in Korean and then left. The girl was visibly upset.

“Mamasan says I have to work. Do you want short-time or long-time?”

We left together as the sun was setting, winding our way through the narrow alleys to her room. I paid her the ten dollars which she quickly ran off and gave to Mamasan.

hollow moon . . .  
how the silver lining  
slips through your fingers

When she came back, we began to talk again. I asked her for her name.

She replied, “Soon Ja.”

We talked some more. We talked all the way to sunrise. She told me how she came to be in Rosa’s that night and every other night for the past 2 years. Turns out that her parents “sold her” to Mamasan when she was only 16.

She owed everything to her keeper and didn't get to keep any of the money she made. Mamasan provided a roof, food, and protection, charging an exorbitant amount for the "favors." Soon Ja would always be in debt unless somehow, someone helped her out.

Our conversation stretched over a couple more weeks. Each night I paid the ten dollars and we sat and talked. She would make bulgogi and rice and all kinds of other Korean dishes for us to share and I would often bring a bottle of wine from the PX to go with it. It was a lovely arrangement. We couldn't help ourselves. We fell in love.

Mamasan, never one to miss an opportunity, suggested that we enter into a formal arrangement as boyfriend and girlfriend. For a price, I could have Soon Ja all to myself. Completely infatuated and with Soon Ja's encouragement we cemented the relationship.

church bells chime . . .  
the puppeteer  
sprinkles stardust

Each night, I would come home to Soon Ja. She always had a meal ready. We communicated very well given my limited Korean and her broken English. We taught each other as we went along. Our evenings and weekends together were blissful. I bought her a bed and some other furniture. She responded ecstatically to my attention.

Eventually, I had to go out for a week on field exercises. All I could do was count the minutes until I could be

back with Soon Ja. It was an excruciating week but it finally ended. Back at the base, I quickly showered off the grime, then hurried to the village. She was waiting for me with a big hug, an extra-clutching hug. When we sat down for dinner, Soon Ja was uncharacteristically quiet. I asked her what was wrong.

She blurted out, “Mamasan made me go back into the club.”

Suddenly, I had no appetite. A surge of adrenaline hit me but I was frozen. I didn’t know what to say. I did my best to console her but it was clear that things had changed. I was furious. Not at her, but at Mamasan. We slept fitfully that night

The next evening I tracked down Mamasan and confronted her. She told me to mind my own business. I went to Soon Ja’s room but she wasn’t there. I went to the club but she wasn’t there either. I waited for her all night but she never came. The next day at work was filled with angst. That night I went back to look for Soon Ja. She was nowhere to be found and the furniture I had bought her was gone. I went back to the club and started asking around.

Finally, one of her friends confided in me that Mamasan had sold her to another Mamasan. That night I drank myself into a stupor. An MP had to escort me back to my barracks. I never saw Soon Ja again.

mourning dove . . .  
too many shadows  
for one man to carry

## **Inside the Gold Mine**

*Contemporary Haibun Online: 15.2*

The wooden stairs are steep, only about ten of them but steep. At the foot is Grandma's canning pantry complete with carefully sealed Mason jars filled with applesauce, jams, jellies, watermelon pickles, and other preserves. Mostly it's fruit we picked. I like it when Grandma chooses me to fetch something from the shelves.

To the left is Grandpa's workbench with an assortment of tools including a bench-grinder, a couple of rock tumblers and, my favorite, a handheld black light. We use it to view the fluorescent stones and minerals in his rock collection gathered on many trips across North America. Fluorite, calcite, and hyalite all dazzle in its subtle glow. Grandpa weaves stories of adventure in with his descriptions of the rocks.

Behind us is Grandma's hand-cranked, wringer washing machine; so fancy. I enjoy wringing out the pants and shirts when the wash is finished. Lines hang from the ceiling near the furnace toward the back of the room. She tells me I'm an expert with clothespins.

*These days I find myself spending more time in the basement. It's quality time for me, springtime in my mind.*

old songs  
playing on the radio . . .  
a pear blossom opens

## **Traveler**

*Failed Haiku: 42*

I've taken the highway, that path that leads from here to there, from anywhere to everywhere it seems. Over mountains and valleys, across rivers and streams, I've hitched my way through cities and deserts, from ocean to ocean, back home and away again. I've stood by the road in the pouring rain, cars rolling by with somewhere to go. Each time I look in a rear-view mirror, mile markers passing by, my thoughts drift back to where I started, when time was on my side.

There is always somewhere to go, something on my mind, even if that something is nothing more than venturing into the unknown. I've walked away from pain and into the arms of love, each time the load a little bit larger, the wind a little bit stronger. It seems there is no end in sight; the magic mountains are just out of reach. So, I buy a map at a local gas station, open it up, and to my delight, find it crisscrossed with roads.

a car radio crackles . . .  
the soles of my shoes  
with a mind of their own

## **Cabin Fever**

*Haibun Today*: 12.3

Outside the cabin, a smaller, child-size log cabin once sat next to the driveway. Over the years, a coven of spiders and wood ticks took it over, the forest slowly staking a claim, gravity wresting it back into the ground. We never played there. Who wants cobwebs in their hair, much less nightmares on the brain? There were bear claw-marks in the wood, for crying out loud. No telling how many creatures chewed on that shack, and the fallen pine needles on the roof left a musty Hansel and Gretel feel. Little children could get lost in there.

Finally, someone dismantled it, the children grew up, and the ghost stories surrounding it gradually subsided into memories of fear we've almost now forgotten.

one stone gathers moss—  
what looks like rain  
is just a cloudy day

## **Flight of the Hummingbird**

*Haibun Today* 13.1

The Butte County fire zone, where the fire has been out of control for weeks, is dotted with small towns and outlying residences. Many who call it home have been displaced. It's a place I once called home.

Red-flag warnings have always been a part of life in the

area but drought made the situation even more precarious. The resultant dead ponderosas and oaks, the fallen leaves, needles, and cones, have proven to be nothing less than tinder.

When I lived there, we had a feeder in a manzanita bush that served as the local diner for countless hummingbirds. It sat right outside the kitchen window. As a young man, I loved to immerse myself in the aerial acrobatics on display there. Even while refilling the feeder, the birds would often sip from it. I hope my feathered friends have all safely migrated south for the winter. But now I ask myself, what is left to come back to?

rain in my dreams . . .  
autumn leaves turned  
to ash

## **Fondly Ever After**

*Haibun Today*: 13.2

we found each other  
in that moment  
breaking over the rails,  
that moment that swept us  
into the sea

If stumbling into misadventure is an art form then we mastered it long ago. Yes, time has passed, and yes, the distance between us is greater than ever. Still, I remember our love of music, our kindred affection for

stories, and how we could cry together and laugh in almost a single breath. I can remember that day we danced to Zydeco for hours as the little time we had left together seemed to skip a beat. I remember our happiest moments as if they are happening now.

Were there warning signs? Who knows? What I do know is that the dream imploded as a result of its own design. What remains are simply fragments of that dream. Still, those fragments speak to me, defying the constraints of time. They speak to me of a vision that was, and will always be, a lighthouse on the island in my mind.

born of desire  
I cast my net  
into the reflection  
you left in ripples  
on the surface of the stream

## **Crossing Paths**

### *Narrow Road*

no moon . . .  
I take a breath  
of silence

I'm in the mountains of West Virginia, dead-set to cross them before daybreak. Problem is, I need a ride and they appear to be in short supply. Finally, a pair of headlights navigating slowly through the falling snow. I stick out my freezing thumb but to no avail. The car eases by.



30 minutes later . . . my ride arrives, two men in a beat-up station wagon. I climb into the backseat without hesitation. We make the usual hitchhiking small talk. I tell them I'm headed to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, returning from Christmas leave. They seem to like my military status.

"You're lucky we came along," the driver quips. "We help the police patrol these roads for hitchhikers. It's dangerous out here."

chilly wind . . .  
that knowing grin  
in the rearview mirror

I study the rough face of the burly driver for a moment as I envision my body being dumped alongside the road. The skinny fellow in the passenger's seat, chuckles. He passes something to the driver then turns around to look at me.

"You want some moonshine?" he asks. "It'll warm you up. There's a jar under the seat."

Oh boy, I'm in a car with a couple of drunks who think they work for the police. I fumble under the seat and pull out the jar. The first sip burns my throat. The car continues on into the coal black night.

"Our turnoff's just ahead," one says. "but we'll take you to the next town where it'll be easier to get a ride."

I thank them, welcoming the thought of civilization. Our

conversation ambles as the liquor begins to warm my body. We talk about the military, patriotism and our love of freedom. We have a lot in common it seems.

Arriving in town, it appears deserted. The two men talk between themselves. Finally, the driver declares that they will take me a little further, to a better spot. Not wanting to step back out into the cold just now, I agree

Each stop breeds a similar conversation and result, just a little bit further. All through the night, we travel. Three-quarters of the way through the jar, I finally spot the welcoming glow of Charleston in the twilight.

going home . . .  
only my shadow  
knows where I've been

## **Deluge**

### *Narrow Road*

On the therapist's couch, I wonder aloud what it would be like to bundle all the pain I've ever experienced together with any future pains, to feel them all at once and be done with it. I mean everything, from the hangnails, slivers, cuts, and bruises, to the pain of lost relationships and death. I think how overwhelming it would be, how completely unbearable. Still, if getting it all over in one great rush was possible, would it be worth it or would it kill me?

a river  
overflows its banks . . .  
silence

## **Breakthrough**

*Poet's Salon: Opening Doors*

I see a light through the keyhole while fumbling with the keys to my imagination. The faint sliver penetrates the darkness just enough that I can tell it's there. I try the first key. It doesn't fit. I try the next and the next. Each is another mismatch. Finally, the last one slips into place. The lock clicks as the key twists. I turn the knob. The door swings wide and daylight spills in.

spring morning  
I follow a bee  
to the honey

## **Switchboard**

Tanka Society of America, Ribbons -- Spring 2019

Not too long ago, we were connected by wires. The wires went to places. We had to be at those places if we wanted to spend time with other people in other places.

Grandma and Grandpa's local phone number was four digits long. At family gatherings, we used to schedule calls from distant family members. On Christmas day, grandchildren would call the house, and we would have a

phone visit, each cousin, aunt, and uncle passing the phone to the next in a daisy chain conversation, beginning and ending with Grandma.

The phone used to be a home device, but we are no longer tied to home. Our circle is contained in digital address books accessible with the touch of a virtual button. We are ever on the go, but someone always knows where we are.

operator  
five, three, two, six, please . . .  
the hum of starlings  
flying free  
across the airwaves

## **Firsthand**

each bud opens  
to its first day  
a leaf  
dancing with the sun  
like a lover

A soft spring sky hovers over the valley. The rain has come and gone. Without a care in the world, she's skipping through a puddle, her clothes still wet from the downpour. There's nothing quite like seeing your first rainbow.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Richard Grahn is a poet, sculptor, photographer, musician, nature-lover, part-time philosopher, and bipolar survivor born in Stoughton, Wisconsin in 1959. He has travelled extensively with many miles logged hitchhiking the highways and backroads of America in his younger days. He likes his music much as he likes his art, experimental and abstract. His writing covers the gambit of human experience including love and loss, history, fantasy, and, most importantly, his upbringing and relationship with the natural world.



